



# THE WASTE REPORT

March 30, 2017

## YOU SAY TOMATO, I SAY WASTE NSF'S \$1.5 MILLION PROJECT TO IMPROVE HOW TOMATOES TASTE

Tomatoes: they put the "T" in *BLT*, are found on burgers, and make salsa what it is. They are in ketchup, pizza sauce, soups, and more. In short, tomatoes are all over the place.

In fact, the average American consumes approximately 31.4 pounds of tomatoes each year, making it the second most consumed vegetable<sup>1</sup> in the United States after potatoes.<sup>2</sup>

**So, given its versatility and popularity, one has to wonder why the National Science Foundation spent over \$1.5 million trying to improve the taste of tomatoes.<sup>3</sup>**

Make no mistake, the research is about taste. In NSF's January press release, "Scientists develop genetic path to tastier tomatoes," the director of the Division of Integrative Organismal Systems (where the funding came from) said, "This state-of-the-art analysis sets the stage to return it to the taste of decades ago by breeding informed by molecular genetics."<sup>4</sup>

Apparently the research found that modern tomatoes are less tasty because they have less sugar and other flavorful chemicals. **Wait ... sugar will make something taste better?**

### IS THIS IN THE TAXPAYER'S INTEREST?

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), three fourths of American tomato

consumption is in "processed form": sauces, ketchup, juice, etc. Further, over a quarter of all tomato consumption occurs "away from home."<sup>5</sup>

These facts seem to indicate there is a significant commercial interest in the tomato. So, one might ask why Uncle Sam is funding better tasting tomatoes and not Heinz, Papa John's, or Campbell's.

The answer may be that their raw taste really does not matter that much if the bulk of tomatoes are enjoyed as part of more complex foods.

### MAYBE IT'S ECONOMICS

Certainly one could argue that making a vegetable taste better will improve its economic viability. NSF even said that "[b]reeding a more flavorful tomato could benefit consumers as well as the tomato industry."<sup>6</sup> One researcher on the project said, "We can make the supermarket tomato taste noticeably better."<sup>7</sup>

So, is the tomato industry hurting? As we have already noted, tomatoes are the second most consumed vegetable in the U.S. The U.S. is the second largest producer of raw tomatoes in the world, making it a \$2 billion annual industry.<sup>8</sup> If only they tasted better.

### STILL NO WORD ON MAKING BRUSSELS SPROUTS TASTE BETTER

<sup>1</sup> Note: Tomatoes are technically a fruit.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=58340>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD\\_ID=1539831&HistoricalAwards=false](https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1539831&HistoricalAwards=false)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=190832](https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=190832)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/vegetables-pulses/tomatoes.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.nsf.gov/news/news\\_summ.jsp?cntn\\_id=190832](https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=190832)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170126142901.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/vegetables-pulses/tomatoes.aspx>